

Victor BK2: Ch20

Book 2: Chapter 20: Bounty Hunter

On the third day of travel toward the city of Gelica, the grasslands gradually gave way to cultivated farmland, and travelers and local workers began to share the roadway with them. Victor had no idea what sorts of crops were being grown in the fields they passed through, but he enjoyed the smell of rich, irrigated soil and the blossoms on many of the rows of plants.

They didn't get much conversation from the locals they passed by—usually, just a grunted greeting and then wary glares. Thayla blamed Victor, saying he was large and strange looking to the blue and red-skinned natives, which prompted him to ask, “Why don't we see any Ghelli or Vodkin around? It's mostly Shadeni or Ardeni.”

“If you think those are uncommon, good luck trying to find an Ilyathi or Onaghi. Cadwalli, though, they like to farm.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about. Other than Cadwalli, I mean.”

“Ilyathi and Onaghi have the same origin world as the Ghelli, though some people claim we all came from the same world and had spread to populate the four worlds around our sun. Then the System came and mashed us all back together.”

“I don't get it. If the System combined all the worlds, why isn't the gravity smashing us into the ground?”

“Gravity?”

“The force pulling us to the ground . . .” Victor started to explain.

“I know what it is! I was just thinking aloud. It could have something to do with Energy or how the System structured the new world. It is enormous, but who's to say what the System did to the mass under the surface? The short answer is, I don't know.”

“Well, if you know about gravity, then I bet there are scholars in this world that have studied the subject.”

“Of course, but do you remember what I told you about schools? Well, my parents had other priorities.”

“Understood,” Victor said, lifting an arm to wave to a woman working in a nearby field. She wore a wide-brimmed hat with silky, turquoise-colored mesh hanging down from the brim. She waved back, and Victor asked, “Is that mesh on her hat to keep bugs off?”

“Yes, and the sun, I would imagine.” Thayla held a hand out to block the hot orb as if to illustrate.

“Anyway, you didn’t answer my question. Why so many Ardeni and Shadeni?”

“I don’t know. We’ve always been more numerous, but I’ve heard Gha has many more Ghelli and their relatives living on it.”

“Gha?”

“Oh, Ancestors! You know so little! Gha is a continent across the sea from Fala, far to the southeast. Before you ask, yes, Fala is the continent you’re standing on.”

“How many continents are there? Do you know?”

“Four major continents and many, many islands and archipelagos that are big enough to spend centuries exploring.”

“Seems like we ought to be able to lose ourselves in this world if we really tried.”

“Oh, I see where this is going. Yes, we might be able to flee our troubles, but we’d never be able to let our guard down. Maybe you could, but I would never feel like my daughter is safe.”

“Right, no worries, Thayla. We’ll try plan A first—deal with the people hunting us. Running for the hills will be a distant plan B, alright?”

“Sounds fair,” she said, taking a big drink of water from one of her containers.

Victor had noticed that the road they’d been following was very gradually losing elevation. They were coming down from some high, dry grasslands into a more fertile, verdant part of the world. Around mid-morning, he saw a line of blue-green trees in the distance stretching from left to right perpendicular to the road. At first, it seemed strange—this ribbon of greenery, but then he realized the trees were bordering a river and that the road was approaching a large, wooden bridge that stretched in a broad arch over the water. “Any idea what river this is?”

“No, we’ll be crossing a lot of similar rivers, I think. Gelica is surrounded by rich farmland. These rivers are like tiny streams compared to the Rill Catcher—the great river Gelica is built upon.”

“Rill Catcher, huh?”

“Yes, it’s a river that crosses most of the continent. Many, many rivers and streams feed it.”

“Huh,” Victor nodded, stewing on what Thayla had told him. The world seemed huge, but he knew from conversations with people in the pits and the mine that there were ways to travel great distances quickly, making it smaller in that regard. Most cities had System Settlement Stones that the citizens had improved to the point where they allowed teleportation for a fee. He’d also heard

there were airships and even people who could fly, teleport, and create portals. In other words, taking a boat across the continent didn't necessarily mean it would be difficult for someone to pursue them.

He was lost in his daydreams about flying ships as they started up the wooden bridge, and he gazed over the hand-carved railing, watching the wide river drift lazily by beneath it. They'd just reached the center of the bridge when movement caught his eye, and he looked away from the water to see a stick-thin, blue-robed, and hooded figure step to the center of the bridge, not twenty paces away from them. The person's long arms were outstretched, each holding a curved, naked, short sword.

"Patience seems to have won the day," a man's dry, raspy voice said from within the hood. Victor didn't remember pulling Lifedrinker from her loop, but she was in his hands, and he'd stepped in front of Thayla.

"Fuck off, man," he growled.

"So then. My reward will be greater should you come with me alive, but if I must deliver your heads, no doubt a quicker, quieter journey will offset my loss in revenue."

"Back up, Thayla," Victor said, glancing back the way they'd come. He couldn't believe the guy was challenging them by himself, but there was no sign of anyone else on either side of the bridge.

"No, Victor!" Thayla's spear was pointed at the blue hooded man, and she'd moved to Victor's side.

"Listen, Thayla," Victor said quickly and quietly. "I can't fight my best if I'm worried about you, and, damn it, I promised the old lady I'd get you to your daughter. Please!"

"I can hear you, warrior. I like your words. A duel is it, then? Yes, should you fight me honorably, I'll promise not to harm your friend when I bring her in." The rail-thin, lanky man bowed as he spoke, and Victor saw that his hands, gripping the sword hilts, were smooth and gray. At first, he thought they were blue and that this man was an Ardeni, but he'd never seen an Ardeni so tall, and the shade of his skin was definitely off.

"Thayla, please." Victor stepped forward again, putting Thayla behind him, and he heard her angry huff as she backed up a step.

"This isn't fair, Victor," she muttered, but he could tell she didn't want to distract him further in the face of the stranger. Victor didn't care if she was mad. He'd be damned if he was going to hold her bleeding, limp body again—not when he'd made so many promises to get her out of this mess. As he heard her backing away, he boosted his agility with Sovereign Will and began channeling rage-attuned Energy into Lifedrinker.

“That’s quite a weapon, warrior,” the man said as Lifedrinker began to hum and glow with a baleful red aura.

“She’s thirsty,” Victor growled, his throat thick with murderous intent. Hadn’t this asshole just said he’d be happy to take their heads? An image of the bounty hunter holding Thayla’s head, fingers gripping her hair as blood dripped to the bridge, flashed into his mind, and a deep rumble began to roll up out of Victor’s chest.

The bounty hunter sketched another bow. Victor only had time to wonder if he should bow back before, in a streak of blue, flapping robes, he was under attack. Victor wasn’t slow, especially with his agility boosted, and he saw the attack coming. He even had time to raise Lifedrinker to intercept one of the blades, but the other slipped under his guard, crashing into his ringed armor. The blade hit him so hard that the impact cracked and echoed over the bridge like a gunshot.

Black flecks of enamel showered up into the air between them, and Victor grunted but didn’t flinch. He jerked Lifedrinker down, driving back the blade that had caught in the crook under her head, and trying to muscle her into the lanky fighter now standing right in front of him. While he strained against the other man’s surprisingly strong arm, he felt a series of lightning stabs from the other sword, testing his armor and finally slipping between two rings. Liquid fire lanced under his ribs as the blade pierced his abdomen, and Victor roared in pain and fury.

As they stood interlocked, Victor slowly pushed his axe down toward the other man’s neck, and the bounty hunter drove and twisted his blade into Victor’s guts. Red hot fury began to boil out of Victor’s Core, and before he lost himself to it, he channeled it into Project Spirit, and the red waves of his spirit rolled out of him, engulfing his attacker.

The blue-robed man jerked his head back, and his hood flopped back, revealing a strange, smooth, gray face with wide, black eyes devoid of emotion. He had wispy white hair, a flat, almost nonexistent nose, and no ears to speak of. His mouth opened in a strange, silent wail, and then he started thrashing about with his swords, completely dismissing any strategy in favor of an all-out, maniacal attack.

Victor felt better having the sword removed from his guts, but the wild, hacking attacks of the bounty hunter were still difficult to avoid or block. As he backed away, trying to put Lifedrinker between himself and the chopping, slashing shortswords, he took several deep gashes to his forearms. Whipping Lifedrinker in savage arcs to hold the frenzied attacker at bay, he cast Inspiring Presence.

As always, things clarified in his mind when the spell took hold—the swords seemed a lot shorter and their wild, hacking trajectories a lot more predictable. Victor’s breathing steadied, and he began to dance with the enraged hunter. He stepped forward as a blade whipped by, snapping Lifedrinker forward to smash her heavy head into the hunter’s smooth, gray face. As she cracked into him, the bounty hunter’s chin jerked up, and Victor stepped forward with a devastating kick, driving his boot into the blue-robed man’s lanky knee.

Victor knew he had to weigh more than three hundred pounds these days, and he could kick harder than probably anyone on Earth. Thus, he wasn’t surprised when the sound that followed his boot

meeting the man's long, extended leg was a resounding, wet crack. The bounty hunter's scream echoed over the bridge, and his wild, frenzied sword swings came to a halt as he stumbled back and fell to the broad, dry planks.

Victor leaped forward, bringing Lifedrinker down with a two-handed, overhead swing, and was utterly stunned when she ripped into the bridge timber, not his opponent. He jerked her out of the wood and spun, looking for the bounty hunter. As he turned toward where Thayla stood, he saw the man, still lying on the bridge, but tipping a small vial to his gray lips. As Victor charged at him again, the man tossed aside the empty bottle and leaped to his feet, dancing back nimbly from Victor's wild cleave.

"Stronger than the reports indicated, warrior," he rasped, darting in, stabbing at Victor's left flank. Thus far, adrenaline and Energy had kept Victor ignorant of his condition, but he couldn't help noting the thick ribbon of bright red blood that followed him as he danced away from the hunter's attack. The center of the bridge was painted with his blood, and he knew that the stab he'd taken at the outset of the battle had to be taking a toll. Still, he felt strong, and with his agility boosted and Inspiring Presence active, he managed to avoid any significant injuries from the hunter's onslaught.

Vaguely, as he and the hunter danced, stabbing, parrying, hacking, dodging, and even tumbling, Victor was aware of Thayla watching with a worried expression and gripping her spear like a rope keeping her from falling off a cliff. A small corner of Victor's mind, not fully occupied with fighting the bounty hunter, knew she was worried, but he wasn't—not yet. He'd wanted to beat the hunter without going berserk, but he knew he still had that card. Still, he held back; he wanted to see everything this man had before he played his ace. So they danced, and Victor bled, and the man began to grow ever so slightly slower.

"You're vitality must be prodigious, warrior. I didn't want to resort to this, but I fear you were more than I anticipated," the man said, stepping back, holding his blades out in a guard position. Victor didn't reply; he simply strode forward, lifting Lifedrinker for a heavy cleave. His rage Energy was starting to seep into his pathways, and he had only one thought as the man spoke: he'd smash those fucking swords to pieces. Suddenly the man's black eyes flared with red Energy, and matching red coils detached from his outstretched swords, flopping through the air between them and whipping into Victor.

Victor jerked Lifedrinker at the weird ropes of red Energy, trying to knock them aside, but they wrapped around his axe, unharmed and rippled up along his arms, and then Victor felt himself being pulled, almost like he was bound to a rack. His arms were jerked to the side, and though he held onto Lifedrinker with his right hand, he couldn't swing her. He looked to his left and right and saw that those red coils had fully wrapped around his wrists and stretched into the sky like they were anchored there. He was bound.

"Sorry to resort to spells, warrior, but when I saw that you'd gone berserk, I knew I had to bind you until it wore off," the man said, his raspy voice wheezing from exertion. Victor didn't respond, but Thayla did, barking a short laugh. "Something

funny, Shadeni?" The man asked, turning so he could keep Victor and Thayla both in his view. "Will you be laughing when I disembowel your friend here?"

"Actually, yes. You think he's berserk?" Thayla laughed again. The hunter's round, black eyes seemed to grow wider, and he turned away from Thayla, slashing a sword toward Victor's midriff, apparently keen on making good his promise to disembowel him. His response was a second too late, though. Victor had cast Berserk while Thayla was speaking, and as his vision darkened, shading the world in a bloody fog, he dimly felt the hunter's sword cleave into his left hip.

As his flesh knitted and fury filled his mind, he tried to smash the little man in front of him, but his hand wouldn't move. If being cut angered him, having something hold his arm when he was trying to hack at an enemy caused his rage to boil up out of his gut in a wave of hot fury that roiled out of his throat in a terrible, ear-shattering roar. He jerked his arms, and his shoulders bunched with the effort, muscles standing out like cords of knotted cables, and then something gave.

The hunter stumbled to a knee, holding a hand up to his head, and Lifedrinker sang through the air, splitting the top of his head like a cleaver through an apple. Victor tugged the sword, still jutting from his hip bone, and, in his rage, drove it through the bounty hunter's body, pinning it to the bridge. He stood, heaving, hunched over his dead enemy, and glared around.

In his red haze, he saw Thayla, and though a large part of him wanted to leap at her, give her a taste of his fury, another part of him said, "No! Not this one," and he growled and paced in a circle, seeking something else to vent his rage upon. Before he had a chance to act or calm down, though, a surge of Energy entered him, so thick and rich that it lifted him from the bridge and instantly cooled his boiling anger. Euphoria filled him, and System messages came into his vision:

Congratulations! You've achieved level 29 Herald of Carnage. You have gained 10 will, 8 strength, and have 10 attribute points to allocate.

Congratulations! You've learned the spell: Berserk - Advanced.

Berserk - Advanced: Prerequisite: Affinity - Rage. You double your strength and speed for a short while, losing yourself in the glory of combat. Your body becomes more resilient, and you benefit from rapid regeneration during the duration, though you'll lose all sense of self-preservation. Your powerful will and experience with rage allow you to retain some self-control while this spell is active. Energy Cost: Minimum 100 - scalable. Cooldown: Long.

When he fell back to the bridge, his thoughts were his own again, and he saw Thayla standing near the corpse of the bounty hunter. She looked at him and frowned, "That wasn't fair to me, Victor." At first, he thought she was talking about how he'd just gained some Energy and a level, but he knew Thayla didn't think that way, so he revised his response.

"I know it's not fair, but Thayla, you realize you can't take the kind of beating I can, right? Look what that asshole did to my armor. Do you think you'd live through a cut like that?" Victor gestured to the rent in his black-ringed armor and all the shiny links that had lost their magical enamel. He hoped the shirt could recover from the damage—it was supposed to be self-repairing.

“No, but I’m not a damsel in distress, either! I deserve to stand up for myself! I have a spear, and I’m fast—he might never have landed a hit!”

“Well,” Victor wanted to argue with her. He wanted to tell her he was faster than she was when he boosted his agility, but he decided it wasn’t worth ‘winning’ this argument. “Look, I might have been wrong. I don’t know. All I know is that when you nearly died to those Naghelli, it wrecked me. I’ve got too much invested in seeing you back with your daughter. Like I said, I know it’s not fair, but if I can help it, I’ll never hold your bleeding body while struggling with the idea that I need to find your daughter, alone, to tell her about her mom. Not again. You can hate me for it if you want.”

“It’s not fair, but I appreciate you, Victor,” Thayla said, kneeling to look through the corpse of the bounty hunter. “By the way, this guy was an Ilyathi. If I’m being honest, he would have destroyed me—I think he was around tier-four; you’re overpowered, Victor.”

“Overpowered? Is that how you describe my amazing talent?” He stepped closer and watched while Thayla checked the robed man’s pockets and slipped an ornate, serpent-shaped ring off his finger. She flicked the ring up to him, and he caught it.

“Sure, you’re talented, but you’ve also got the strongest combination of abilities I’ve ever seen. Well, maybe other than Lam. Ancestors! You should have seen how you looked when you went berserk—like a hulking titan. That bounty hunter didn’t realize what he’d signed up for, that’s for sure.” She picked up the sword that wasn’t jammed a foot into the bridge and examined it. “This is worth a lot of money, Victor. Both of these swords are if we can get the other one free. They’ll fetch a pretty price in town if you don’t want them. Anything in the ring?”

Victor bonded with the ring and let his inner eye drift to its contents, listing off what he saw to Thayla, “Some food—like a few dozen bowls of soup, lots of wine, water, and bread. Six potion bottles like the one he drank to fix his knee. Um, some more robes in different colors, a pair of boots, a bow with some arrows, and over a thousand Energy beads.” Victor leaned down and yanked the other sword out of the bridge and body. “You keep one of the swords,” he said, stowing the one he held into his ring.

“No, they’re a set, Victor. You’ll get a lot more for them together.” She held the other sword out to him, and he took it, figuring he’d share the money with her when he offloaded them. “I know you’ve been busy fighting and all, but there’s a wagon coming, about a mile up the road.”

“Right,” Victor said, picking up the bounty hunter’s body and tossing it over the bridge.

“Victor!” Thayla said, aghast.

“What?”

“I don’t know. I mean . . . oh, never mind. We could have put him in a storage ring and buried him or something.” She sighed and started walking down the far side of the bridge.

“Sorry, Thayla. I wasn’t thinking,” Victor walked beside her, poking at the tear in his chain shirt, pleased to see that it felt a little smaller.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. Fish need to eat, too, right? It’s not like he was a friend or even a good guy.”

“Yeah, he started it, right?” Victor punched at Thayla’s shoulder playfully, trying to get a smile out of her, but she was stoically serious, allowing him to jostle her without a word. “Hey, you still mad I fought him alone?”

“No, I’m just worried. That guy wasn’t cheap and wasn’t some old, wily hunter trying to catch a big score. That was a real killer.” Her eyes were focused down the road on the wagon coming their way. Victor could see it was a farmer; the wagon was piled high with green hay or alfalfa or something.

“Yeah, well, another day, and we’ll be in the city. Job one, we’ll get something to hide us from scrying spells.”

“Right, and then we need to find a place to lay low while I use that stone Lam gave me. She might be able to help us figure out who’s responsible for the bounty on our heads. I mean the specific members of the ap’Yensha clan.”

Victor snapped his fingers and said, “You’ve been thinking about this plan without me?” He’d completely forgotten about the stone Lam had given Thayla.

“Not really. I figured that much was common sense,” finally, she looked at him with a smile, and he laughed.

“So, you really think that guy was tier-four, huh?”

“Well, I’m not sure, but the Energy he gave off was tinged with a lot of purple. That’s a pretty good sign.” They’d left the bridge behind, and, as the wagon piled with green grass passed them by, she waved at the driver, a short Ardeni woman in a pair of yellow overalls.

“Ho, travelers, how’s the road ahead? I’ve a few miles yet to take this hay!” She had a bright, cheerful voice, and Victor was quick to wave back and reply.

“Pretty smooth back the way we came. How’s the road where you came from?”

“Lovely! What a day! Doesn’t the sun feel good? Soak it up because autumn’s coming fast.”

“How far’s Gelica?” Thayla asked.

“You could get there tomorrow by the end of the day if you hurry. I’d stop at the Red Roladii, though—you’re only an hour or two out, and they have the best brewery this side of the Rill Catcher.”

“Oh really?” Victor asked.

“Yep! I stayed there last night—got so drunk I didn’t get on the road ‘til noon! My dad’s going to have my hide!” She laughed and gave the roladii pulling her wagon a little switch with the reins and started rolling again. “Good travels!” she called as she passed them.

“Well? What do you say? A night at the Red Roladii, then hit Gelica tomorrow?” He draped an arm over Thayla’s shoulders and started walking. She leaned into him for a minute but then pushed his arm off.

“You’re too damn heavy to be leaning on people, Victor,” she said, but her words were softened by the smile on her face and a poke in the ribs with her elbow.